

RESIDENTIAL REAL ESTATE **FOCUS**



Customized comforts

BY NICOLE BRADFORD
SPECIAL TO HOUSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

From personal golf courses to reclaimed wood beams to a living coral reef, Houston's high-end homes are coming equipped with features that run the gamut — and vary in range from the very practical to the wildly luxurious. *HBJ* spoke with Houston-based real estate and building professionals to explore the hot features Houstonians are requesting for their home sanctuaries.

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INSIDE



Aquariums
A reality show inspired this recent trend in area homes

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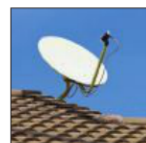
Cocktail pools
Downsizing includes pool size

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Putting greens
Recreation takes center stage in some backyards

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High-tech
Remote security and lighting systems are must-haves

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COMING UP

On Aug. 17, *HBJ* will publish the Residential Real Estate midyear report, exploring the state of the Houston home market.

COMFORTS

FROM PAGE 1B

POSH AQUARIUMS

Forget snorkeling — imagine inhabiting a home with its own living coral reef.

A spotlight on ultra-posh aquariums via reality TV has created a new demand for high-end fish tanks that are seamlessly incorporated into a home's design.

Aquarium Design Group, the company responsible for the head-turning, signature aquariums at The University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center and Texas Children's Hospital, doesn't stop at commercial installations. The Houston-based firm also creates various types and sizes of waterscapes in high-end custom homes.

Many times the tank is incorporated into the home design from the architect's drawing board, said owner Mike Senske.

Some buyers choose freshwater, while others choose a more expensive, coral reef option that comes with the oversight of a designated marine biologist.

A custom aquarium installation ranges from \$6,000 to \$100,000 depending on the type and size, with maintenance costing anywhere between \$200 and \$1,000 or more per month for a large coral reef aquarium. All of Aquarium Design Group's tanks include maintenance.

Since the downward shift of the economy in 2007 and 2008, the company's installations in the \$400,000 to \$700,000 home range has suffered.

However, Senske said business has increased in homes in the \$1 million and up range. Some of that may come from recent aquarium exposure on reality TV. A show on Animal Planet called "Tanked" follows a Las Vegas aquarium company as it builds aquariums in the shape of a phone booth, car or a skateboard ramp.



Houston-based Aquarium Design Group gets much of its residential business from \$1 million and up homes.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MARTHA TURNER PROPERTIES

Senske's company focuses on aquascapes that are more a part of the home than an anomaly.

"Ours fit into what is going on in the house from an interior design standpoint," he said.

Another show, "Fish Tank Kings," features extreme aquariums going into expensive homes.

"It's created awareness, I think," Senske said. "More people are looking to one-up each other, but they are also adding things to their homes to make them more beautiful."

But Las Vegas aquarium companies

may not get all the TV glory. Senske said his company is filming a pilot for another reality TV series to be presented to Animal Planet.

"For us, it's living art, and there's a sense of purpose for (every) aquarium in each space," he said.

"These things really blow people away," said Dewey Hennessee, co-owner of Houston-based Matt Powers Custom Homes and Renovations, which reports an uptick in custom aquarium requests this year.

"You can see sunlight dappling on the water. People are designing homes around them," he said. "We did three just in the

last year."

Aquariums often are built as a focal point of the room, within a sheetrock wall as part of the house, Hennessee added. Some take up a major portion of the room, and one home's silo-style tank serves as the central focal point.

"It's really serene," he said.

Fish aren't the only nonhumans finding a place in Houston's luxury homes.

"More and more people are designing rooms or spaces for their pets, and that's not something I've seen a lot of over the years," said Paul Sullivan, president of Magnolia-based Sullivan Signature Homes.

One of his current contracts features custom-designed dog digs for an owner who requested an entire kennel room the size of most master bedrooms. The room includes a dishwasher, floor drain, sink and bathtub, and another contract includes a pet shower.

Still another home converted the space under the stairs for a pet.

"What would have been wasted space or some type of closet is its own little kennel," said Sullivan.

SCALING BACK AND GOING MORE UPSCALE

Even for buyers who can afford more, the trend of quality over quantity appears to have caught on.

In general, homes are getting smaller. The median size of a new home in 2010 was 2,169 square feet, according to the U.S. Census, down from the 2007 peak of 2,277 square feet.

The reason for the trend toward smaller homes, local experts say, could be not only are more buyers empty nesters and don't need or want more space to take care of, but more buyers are spending money on quality vs. quantity.

"One can either put the money in size, or put it in the details, but if your budget is X, then something has to give," said Andrew Whitacre, managing partner for Carlton Woods Properties in The Woodlands.

Lessening the square footage also means lowering upkeep in terms of effort and cost. And homeowners aren't applying this tactic only indoors.

Cocktail pools — elegant but smaller swimming pools that require far less



Empty nesters' movement toward less square footage also applies to their swimming pools. Smaller pools, known as cocktail pools, are ideal for entertaining in a smaller space.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TEXAS POOLS



maintenance — are popular with buyers whose children are grown or who have smaller lots.

"You have empty nesters who are downsizing, and they've had every kind of pool you can imagine," said Paul Ryan, president of The Woodlands-based Texas Pools.

"They've downsized their home, and now they want to downsize their pool. In lots of cases, it's used as an ambiance or just for getting wet or for guests coming over for drinks and dinner."

Over the years, Ryan said, he has built four, five and in some cases six pools for the same customers.

"Three years later, they might have a big-



Ryan

ger house and need a bigger pool," he said.

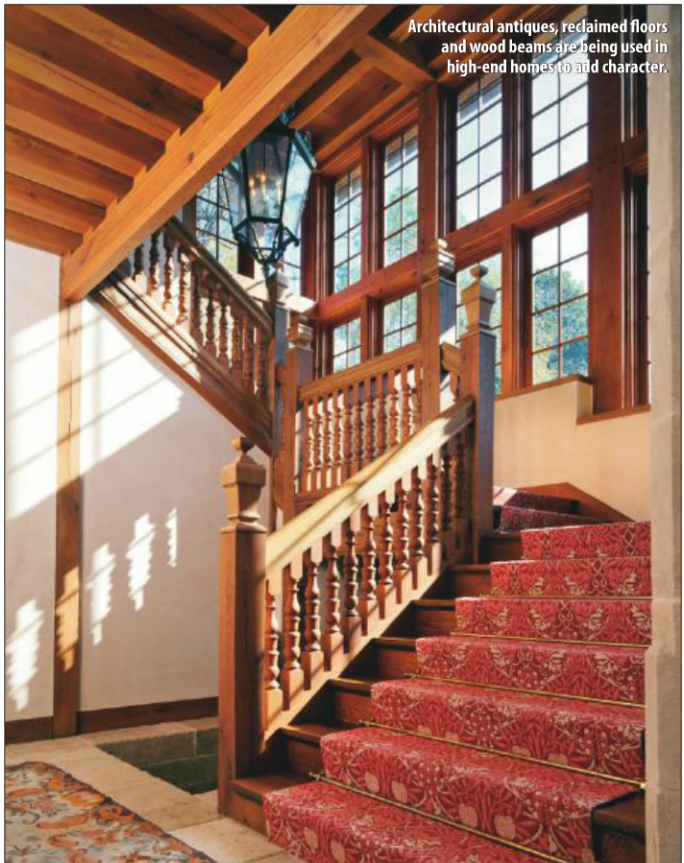
"But now, the reverse is happening. They are retirees who want something to hang around in and enjoy friends. They say, 'I don't want something as fancy as what I used to have.'"

For those customers, gone are the slides, caves and waterfalls.

"No one is coming over to play volleyball," Ryan said. "It's just more laid back and low key, which also means (less) maintenance."

Reducing the size of a home doesn't necessarily mean reducing one's budget. In many cases, buyers are investing in higher-quality and reclaimed materials to avoid the cookie-cutter style of the ubiquitous McMansion.

SEE COMFORTS PAGE 4B



Architectural antiques, reclaimed floors and wood beams are being used in high-end homes to add character.

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COMFORTS

FROM PAGE 3B

Richer, more expensive finishes such as walnut are making appearances as buyers realize more is not necessarily better, local agents said.

"I see a lot of vintage accent pieces and tiles mixed in with newer pieces," said Susan Boss, broker associate for Martha Turner Properties. "You have beams coming out of older homes and doors being brought in from all over the world to add some really unique details — so you're not walking into a house and seeing all the same finishes (as) all the other houses in the neighborhood."



Boss

By bringing in reclaimed wood flooring and architectural accents from older structures, buyers get the flavor and uniqueness of an older home with all the features — including energy efficiency — of a new home, she said.

"I'm seeing old barn wood, old beams from buildings used for trusses and all sorts of cherry, oak and hickory that, even if it's reworked, brings in a lot of personality."

MAKING THE MOST OF OUTDOOR AREAS

It's not every backyard that has its own putting green, but more custom-designed homes are incorporating things individual owners love and enjoy.

Golf is one pursuit high on the list for Houstonians.

Sharon Ballas, a top-selling agent with Greenwood King Properties in Houston, said she has had several clients who considered yard space a top concern.



Ballas

"One was looking for a place to put some type of putting green, so they were interested in a large yard," she said. "Someone else wanted to do a tennis court. They want to be home to entertain their children and families."

One of Ballas' current listings qualifies as a golf lover's dream, with a 65-yard green outdoors and a golf simulator indoors.

"You can pull up famous holes all over the world, and you hit the ball into the simulator — it can handle up to 250 miles per hour," she said. "It's just amazing."

Also popular is blending the outdoors and indoors — which is especially challenging given Houston's hot and muggy climate.

While some install outdoor air conditioners to temporarily cool a seating area, others incorporate disappearing doors that enclose an area. Some doors fold up, turning a once-enclosed room into a patio. These doors can enclose a 16-foot-wide opening, said Sullivan of Sullivan Homes, and can cost up to \$40,000.

"I haven't seen a lot of them in the past, but here recently I've seen a couple of them in bids," he said. "It surprised me a little bit because of the Houston humidity. It's nice, but something you'd see in California. The design originated there."

Pools, too, are moving closer to outdoor spaces, said Kevin Frankel, vice



Golf is making its way into Houston's high-end backyards.

president of Houston-based Frankel Building Group.

"They want the pool to integrate completely with the covered area," he said. "This is tricky, because it has to be taken into account early in the design. We did a house in Tanglewood where a good part of the pool deck and pool is under the covered area, maybe 100 feet."

About 80 percent of his clients want a pool, he said, and more of those are wanting a little extra relief from the notorious Houston heat — especially after last summer's record high temperatures.

"Think about how hot the pool gets," he said. "In Houston, there's not relief being in the sun in a pool. Everyone's trying to get that precious covered space."

Some pool owners are installing "chillers" that lower the pool temperature and cost about \$2,500.

"Compared to the price of the pool, that's not expensive," Frankel said. "The pool becomes more exciting and usable, especially with a covered patio. You can hang out there all day. That's the outdoor lifestyle I think people are looking for."



Frankel

HOMES ACCESSIBLE FROM ANYWHERE

The must-have features of today's high-end homes aren't so much about what is seen as what isn't.

The rise of environmentally friendly and energy efficient buildings, combined with concern over security and Houston's still-very-fresh memories of the aftermath of Hurricane Ike have created a list of necessities that can be considered more practical than extravagant.

"What happened back in '08 is still on people's minds," said Jeff Paul, president of Jeff Paul Custom Homes, who is currently building in the new Montgomery County development of Woodforest.

Paul is one of several experts who said generators, or prewiring a home to run all or part of basic electrical functions from a generator located in an out-of-the-way area, have gone up on buyers' wish lists since Hurricane Ike left many in Houston without power for weeks in the fall of 2008.

"We are doing a lot of survival-mode generators that will run one A/C unit, a kitchen and a bank of lights and plugs, where you can hunker down and be comfortable in part of the house."

Also popular among clients are home automation systems.

"They can turn off their lights or climate

ALL IN THE DETAILS

Other popular features Houstonians are requesting:



Decorative ceilings

Wood beams, groin vaults and cathedral ceilings are trending, as well as antique brick ceilings in wine rooms.



Elevators

Buyers are thinking long term, and many request homes equipped with vertical space that can convert from storage into an elevator shaft when the need arises.



Decorative vent hoods

These may be copper or custom-painted, and are often the visual focal point of the entire kitchen, said one builder.



Downstairs game rooms

More families want ease of rotation between floors of the game room, living areas and kitchen.

control from their car using an iPhone or iPad to control the systems," he said.

"When people asked for home automation five years ago, we thought they meant audio-visual, TVs and speakers in rooms — and they did," said Frankel. "But what home automation really is about is security — lighting and HVAC — and then you jump into audio visual after that. We decided to start from that perspective once the market turned down."

Today, Frankel Building Group installs smart security in all its homes.

"One of the coolest things about home automation is from a security and lighting perspective, you can control it remotely. I was on vacation and I picked up my iPhone, I put in my security code, turned off my alarm and let my brother in to feed my cat," he said.

"If you look at it from a security standpoint instead of a cool tools standpoint, you think, 'I really need to have that. It's a must-have right now.'"

As technology and oft-used appliances change, so does home design. Enter the flat screen TV. Once a novelty, this slim descendant of the bulky device in virtually every living room is often now hung on walls like a piece of art or fit into a 4-inch deep built-in shelf.

"It's like putting a picture up," said Hennessee of Matt Powers Custom Homes and Renovations. "New flat-screen TVs have really impacted design. The last homes we've built, they had artwork over the TV. Another one has the TV as a framed picture, with a screen saver when the TV is not on."


NICOLE BRADFORD is a freelance writer.

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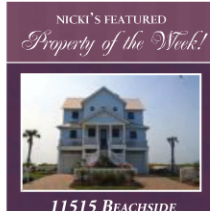


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